



# AGE, GENERATION AND TIME IN A TANZANIAN CHIEFDOM

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## **AGE, GENERATION AND TIME IN A TANZANIAN CHIEFDOM**

### **THE AGE SYSTEM OF THE RWA OF MOUNT MERU<sup>1</sup>**

This article offers a new contribution to the much-discussed subject of the anthropology of age and generational systems in East Africa. Such systems have been observed in a large number of societies, assuming an extraordinary variety of forms that transcend linguistic and ethnic boundaries. They are found in a wide area extending from Sudan to Tanzania, passing through Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda (Hazel 1985, Baxter and Almagor 1978, Kurimoto and Simonse 1998). It is worth recalling that these systems were first studied among Nilotic- or Cushitic-speaking shepherds or agropastoralists, developing in arid or semiarid zones. They are also found further south among Bantu-speaking populations that live on breeding and farming, such as the Kikuyu, Meru, Embu, Mbeere, Pokomo and Kuria peoples in Kenya. These groups have little structure and their age sets seem relatively dissociated from the rest of the social organization. But these systems serving a ritual or vaguely political purpose are dying out. It was in large part a work of reconstruction that enabled Peatrik (1999) to publish her rich description of the age system of the Tigania-Igembe Meru of Mount Kenya. At the beginning of her book, she emphasized the problems she initially had investigating a “buried” subject.

Conversely, the age and generation system of the Rwa of Mount Meru in northern Tanzania is still very current. It is even undergoing a revival, and is the pride of the people it concerns. It is exceptional in this regard, but this is not the system’s only original aspect. The specific ethnographic context of this age system, which is quite unusual, gives the following study particular significance. First, the data I present and analyse below has never before been the subject of a publication. Furthermore, from a geographical point of view, it is one of the most southern of the age systems found in East Africa. But most importantly, this system is part of a society that is very different from those in which it is usually observed. It is connected with a strong lineage organization and a centralized chieftaincy. This is its principal significance from a sociological perspective. We are a long way from the general hypothesis formulated by Tornay regarding the Nyangatom of Ethiopia (2001: 10), which says that “the generation system is conceived as an alternative solution to the society’s clan or lineage division”. All the more, I might add, when a well-structured, very central power is added to the lineage organization. However, are we speaking about the same thing?

The description of the logic and structure of this age system will shed light on this question. It will be compared with others it is modeled after, namely those of the Maasai and Arusha. The various functions this age-system fulfils in daily life will then be described. They imply cognitive, military, political, matrimonial, demographical, social, legal and ritual aspects which will be compared to similar aspects in other East African age-systems. The third part

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Harald Müller-Dempf and Anne-Marie Peatrik for their comments and suggestions, and Annelise Binois and Silvana Wasitova for their help in translating this paper.

analyses the place that this system occupies in the overall structure of Rwa society. I will examine how roles are connected and responsibilities divided among the age system, lineage organization and chieftaincy, thus emphasizing how these three structures complement one another. However, the current situation presented in the first three parts of this article is fairly new. In the fourth part, I will place it in a historical perspective to show its genesis. Rwa society has undergone serious crises since the arrival of colonists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, provoking imbalances and readjustments between the three main components of the social organization. This turbulent history sheds light on tendencies observed today, particularly with regard to the age system. But current attitudes are primarily a response to the constraints and opportunities of modern life. These are thoroughly changing the everyday life of the Rwa and altering their view of the past customs they have inherited. But before taking up these various points, I will briefly present the specific ethnographic context of Rwa society.

### ***Rwa society***

The Rwa speak a Bantu language, *Ki-rwa*. In Tanzania the Rwa are known as the Meru (plural Wameru), but in their own language they call themselves the Rwa (singular *Nrwa*, plural *Varwa*). Here I will use their ethnonym to avoid any confusion with the Meru of Mount Kenya, to whom they are unrelated. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they settled on the south-eastern slopes of Mount Meru (4585 m) facing Mount Kilimanjaro. Initially few in number, their population increased slowly before rising much more sharply from 1880. There were hardly 12,000 of them in 1921, but by 1978 this number had increased almost tenfold to 115,000 (Spear 1997: 120-121 and 128). Their population has more than doubled since then, with the 2014 census estimating it to be around 250,000, and this demographic explosion in a limited space has not come without major problems. They are the eastern neighbours of the Arusha, farmers culturally similar to the Maasai who settled on the south-west side of this mountain later, from 1830. Though they are now peaceful, the relations between these two populations were often conflictual and the conjunctions between them are noticeable, particularly with regard to their age organisations, as we will see.

Culturally and linguistically, the Rwa are similar to the Chaga of Mount Kilimanjaro. From the heights of Mount Meru on a clear day, Mount Kilimanjaro can be seen to the east, beyond a semi-desert plain roamed by the Maasai. The Chaga are much more numerous than the Rwa, and much better known. They are the subject of an abundant literature, whereas the Rwa have been studied very little. The most useful studies on them are those by historian Spear (1997) and socio-economist Larsson (2001), as well as the unpublished thesis by Puritt (1971)<sup>2</sup>. This marked discrepancy between the Chaga and the Rwa is the result of their very different pasts. The Chaga, long involved in long-distance trade circuits, quickly attracted the interest of the Western world, whereas the Rwa stayed on the sidelines. Both populations practice the same kind of intensive farming benefitting from the mountain climate and two rainy seasons each year. Like the Chaga, the Rwa primarily cultivate coffee and bananas. Coffee, a cash crop, was the source of a rapid economic boom while bananas, a subsistence crop, provided food and drink. Other food-producing plants (primarily maize and beans) supplement these resources along with cattle breeding in stables, because these mountains are very densely populated and there is no space available for pastures. The settlement is made up of contiguous farms, villages being only administrative circumscriptions. Since the fall in the price of coffee, their proximity to the town of Arusha has been an invaluable asset for the

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<sup>2</sup> Haram's book (1999) describes the situation of marginalized women, not Rwa society itself.

Rwa, offering outlets for their agricultural produce (vegetables, milk) and providing jobs for the most qualified workers.

As for the history of the Rwa, which Spear (1997) recounted up to the 1950s, it was particularly turbulent. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts with the Arusha were followed by German colonization. This was brutally imposed after Rwa warriors murdered the first Lutheran missionaries who came to the site in 1896. The German repression was terrible. Rwa warriors were decimated and the country was devastated. The Rwa warriors's ascendancy over the traditional chief (*Mangi*) came to an end, but this figure was no better treated by the Germans. Over a period of six years, three successive chiefs were hanged or imprisoned (Spear 1997: 80), and this led the royal Kaaya clan to refrain from offering a new successor. It was therefore a man from an ordinary clan, Sambegye Nanyaro, who was appointed as chief in 1902. Meanwhile, the Lutheran mission was established under colonial protection and a gradual conversion to Lutheranism, which proceeded not without a struggle (Baroin 2001), led to major changes in mentalities. The traditional chieftainship was subsequently consolidated under German, then British authority. The successive chiefs, propped up by colonial power as was the case throughout Africa, became administrators and tax collectors.

The history of the Rwa went through a new dramatic episode in the early 1950s. Known as the Meru Land Case, it catapulted this small population onto the international scene (Spear 1997: 209-235). The Rwa objected to a land expropriation plan by the British administration. Since Tanganyika was managed by the English under the aegis of the United Nations, the Rwa had the audacity to address themselves to this organisation in order to bring action against the colonial authority. The affair received a lot of attention at the time, and it is still a source of pride for the Rwa today. Their revolt in full swing, they also objected to their traditional chief, the *Mangi*, being forced to apply British directives. Unable to abolish the post, they chose to circumvent it by creating a whole new independent institution that would meet their needs. Thus in 1951 a new, undeclared chieftainship quietly came into being. Ten years later, in 1961, Tanganyika gained independence and soon thereafter in 1963, all "traditional" chieftainships shaped by the colonists were abolished. Thus the *Mangi* institution came to an end, but the other, still-unofficial chieftainship remained.

This neo-traditional chieftainship still exists today and plays a major role in Rwa society (Baroin 2003). Its supreme chief does not hold the title *Mangi*, because it is a different institution. He is called *Nshili nnini*, "great chief". This title uses the term *nshili* (pl. *washili*), which designates clan (*ufwari*) chiefs or age set (*irika*) chiefs. This supreme chief presides over a Council that meets regularly. It is called *Mringaringa*, after a species of tree (*Cordia abyssinica*, Borag.). In fact, Council meetings and all meetings concerning the Rwa as a whole are held by a majestic *mringaringa* situated in the very central village of Poli. This council and its chief resolve the most sensitive problems, maintain general harmony and ensure respect for the Constitution, a written document directly inspired by British colonial initiatives (Spear 1997: 198) in which the Rwa recorded their customary law and political rules.

The lineage system is older. Today Rwa society is made up of 17 patrilineal clans that formed gradually and have varying numbers of members. Prior to colonization, two clans shared power. The Kaaya clan held political power and chose the *Mangi* from their own ranks, while the Mbise clan held religious power. They are the ones who took care of rituals addressed to ancestors, requesting rain or the end of a cataclysm. Clans have retained an important role to this day. They manage family matters and inheritance problems, especially those relating to

land. These questions are crucial in a context of insufficient land due to demographic pressure. The supreme chief of each clan is automatically a member of the Council.

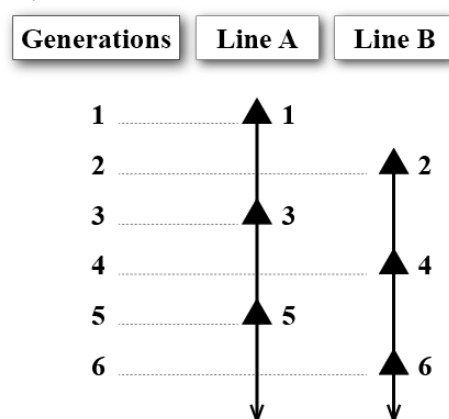
The age system defines horizontal groups in which the youngest are initially warriors. Its leaders maintain order but as we will see, the age system's functions go beyond this. The lineage system and the age system each define a hierarchy of chiefs crowned by the central council and its chief.

Today the vast majority of the Rwa are literate Lutherans. Many have a secondary school education, and some have attended university. All of them speak Swahili, Tanzania's national language, and a small number of them speak English, the country's other official language.

## I – THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE AGE SYSTEM

### 1 – The categories and their recruitment

East African age-systems often combine two distinctive notions, namely age and generational level. Such is the case for the Rwa. Their system not only divides the population into successive age brackets, but these brackets are interlinked by symbolic filiation links in which the “sons” succeed their “fathers” as a function of two lineages that take turns producing a new generation of “sons”(fig. 1).



**Figure 1 – Generation alternation between two filiation lines**

Let us first consider these age brackets, which the Rwa call *irika* (pl. *marika*). This term is very similar to its equivalent in Swahili and Chaga, *rika*, pl. *marika*. But the root of this word, *rik*, is Nilotic and is found among much more geographically remote populations. Such is the case of the Nuer of Sudan, who also designate their age sets by the word *ric* (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 250). I will translate this term as “generation-set” instead of “age set” in view of the filiation links that unite them. These generation-sets follow each other over time, and encompass the whole masculine population. Women are not involved, which is no exception in such systems<sup>3</sup>. A Rwa woman is simply assimilated to her brothers' generation-set, then to

<sup>3</sup> Kurimoto and Simonse (1998: 19) point out the scarcity of female age sets.

her husband's, which usually amounts to the same since the women typically marry in the same generation-set. Each generation-set has a distinctive name and groups together all men born during a given period, the age difference between members not exceeding 15 to 20 years on average.

As life expectancy usually does not exceed 90 years in Rwa country, at any given moment, four or five distinct groups coexist, from the oldest to the youngest, not including children and teenagers who are not yet incorporated in the system. The ranks of the oldest generation-sets dwindle and disappear one by one due to aging and dying, while new generation-sets form and enter the scene every 15 to 20 years or so. From the beginning of the history of the Rwa (17th century) up to the present day (2015), there have been 23 consecutive generation-sets over a period of around four centuries. The latest and 23rd in the series, that of the Kilovio, was established in 2005. When the new generation-set enters “into service” it replaces the preceding one, whose members have become too old to assume the role of warriors.

The periodical renewal of the warrior group is one of the main functions of age systems in East Africa. Among the Rwa, similar to the Maasai system for example, the youngest generation-set—that of the warriors (*nsero*, pl. *wasero*)<sup>4</sup>—is in principle responsible for defending the area, even for attacking neighbours, recovering stolen cattle or stealing other people's cattle. These periods of hostility are now a thing of the past, and the nature of the warriors' role has changed, as we will see below.

This chronological list of 23 names is subdivided into two symbolical filiation lines (let us say A and B) that alternate, taking turns supplying the new generation-set of warriors. The serving warriors are therefore never the symbolic “sons” of the immediately preceding generation-set, but rather of the generation-set two notches above (fig. 1).

This point merits examination, since wide age gaps between siblings, that were formerly increased by widespread polygyny, can cause a “demographic drift” (Peatrik 1999: 101-106), that is to say a confusion of age levels and generations that can lead to a malfunction in the system. It is therefore necessary to thwart this drift. How are these two alternating series of “fathers” and “sons” linked to biological realities? The Rwa have some simple rules to mitigate this problem. First of all, the first biological sons of a man from a given series (which I will call series A) always belong to the symbolical generation-set of “sons” of the same series as their father, a generation-set of “sons” that, by definition, is situated two notches away on the list of generation-sets, as shown on figure 1. This is because these first sons cannot be admitted to the generation-set immediately behind that of their father, since it belongs to the alternate series B. However, the youngest of this same phratry, born much later, may be too young to belong to the same generation-set as their older brothers. If this is the case, they will simply join the next generation-set that corresponds to their age, regardless of whether or not it belongs to the same symbolical series. Thus when a man has procreated over a long period, it is not unusual for his youngest sons to belong to the third or fourth generation-set behind that of their father. In this regard, the Rwa age system differs radically from purely generational systems such as that of the Nyangatom for example (Tornay 2001), in which only the generation is taken into account in the recruitment of categories.

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<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all vernacular terms are in Ki-rwa language.

Biological filiations within families are far from coinciding perfectly with the symbolic filiations of the generation system. But the operation of the system is not affected; regardless of these occasional rectifications, over time it imperturbably rolls out two alternating symbolic filiation lines, which take turns spawning a new generation-set of “sons”. The inauguration of a new generation-set of warriors gives rise to a big ceremony that is at once a collective rite of passage and a historic event, since the history of the Rwa is divided up by this succession of generation-sets.

## **2 - A system that punctuates time and history**

The Rwa keep the official list of the 23 successive generation-sets that they say have existed from the beginning until today (2015), which they enumerate during important ceremonies. This list is as follows:

1. Kiborony
2. Kiwandai
3. Ulukuvai
4. Kisavai
5. Ngina
6. Kisaruni
7. Kisetu
8. Aremu
9. Marishari
10. Mirisho
11. Soori
12. Siyoi
13. Dung'uri
14. Mangusha
15. Ulutalala
16. Ulutuwati
17. Ulutareto
18. Kisali (previously named: Kakisha)
19. Sitimu
20. Seuri (previously named: Sitelingi, Shombo)
21. Ulutalala (previously named: Roketi)
22. Mangusha (previously named Kakisha)
23. Kilovio (future name: Ulutareto)

### *A plurality of names*

Though final names are the only ones to be remembered in the long term, each generation-set has over the course of its existence a multiplicity of names, as do the Arusha (Gulliver 1963 : 28). Each time a generation-set is created, it takes an appropriate name linked to a current or historic event. Then, when it retires fifteen to twenty years later in favour of a new generation-set of warriors, it abandons this initial name and adopts another more respectable, permanent name, but without totally obliterating the original one. During my initial investigations in 1992, when a few scarce Kisali (no. 18) were still alive, people could remember the initial names of each of the present generation-sets:

- the Kisali (no. 18), the oldest, whose name signified "peace", were previously called

Kakisha, a term that designates the red pearls of a Maasai ornament that members of this generation-set were the first to wear.

- the Sitimu (no. 19) who followed them were also called the Nyangusi (a Maasai name) but they are more commonly known as the Sitimu, an initial name that comes from the English word “steam”, chosen because the first steam engines came into operation during their time.
- the Seuri (no. 20) are known by two previous names: they were once called Shombo, a word that designates the Maasai sword, and also Sitelingi, the Rwa-language equivalent of Starling. They adopted this name in remembrance of the fact that the Starling Astarad company was at that time (between 1945 and 1953) building the road that passes the foot of Mount Meru, linking Moshi to Arusha.
- the Ulutalala (no. 21) were just beginning to assume this “permanent” name in 1992. At that time they were still mainly known by their initial name, Roketi. Derived from the English word “rocket”, this name recalls that the first rockets were launched around the time of their inauguration.
- the Mangusha (no. 22), a new generation-set in 1992, were then called the Kakisha, which was also the youth name of their "grandfathers" (no. 18). It was only at the end of their warrior mandate—between 2005 and 2009 depending on the location—that they adopted the name Mangusha.
- the Kilovio (no. 23), the last generation-set on the 2014 list, did not yet exist in 1992. They will adopt the name Ulutareto (no. 17) when they make way to a new generation-set of warriors.

Each generation-set is therefore known by a multiplicity of names that overlap and succeed one another, some of which have been taken from ancestral generation-sets. Thus a token of respect takes names that risk sinking into oblivion and brings them back to the forefront. However, the return of old names is neither systematic nor regular. On the list above, one will notice that the name Mangusha (no. 14) was readopted by generation-set no. 22, the name Ulutalala (no. 15) by generation-set no. 21, and the name Ulutareto (no. 17) by generation-set no. 23. Generation-sets nos. 21 and 23 adopted the names of their great-grandfathers, and generation-set no. 22 adopted an even older name, that of their great-great-grandfathers (no. 14).

Some of these names are temporal reference points, such as Sitimu or Roketi, but in the long term the number of elapsed generation-sets is not a reliable duration marker. Nothing proves that the pace of their succession has been regular since the beginning. It could have accelerated or slowed down depending on the period, as was the case with the Maasai, for whom “the duration of the sets was greater in the past” (Fosbrooke 1956 : 197). For the Rwa, data is lacking on the earliest periods, but they were already on their eleventh generation-set, that of the Soori, according to their current official list (see above), by the time the Arusha settled on Mount Meru around 1820-1840 (Spear 1997: 29), a fact that clearly conveys their undeniable precedence. What about the period preceding the arrival of the Arusha? The Rwa say they had an autonomous system at that time, but several clues point to a more long-standing Maasai influence.

### 3 - Comparison with the Maasai and Arushaage systems

The first indication of this influence lies in the first two syllables of several names, *Ulu-*, which is a clear transposition of the Maasai *ol-*. These names have a Maasai consonance, even



if similar names of the earliest Maasai generation-sets are not known<sup>5</sup>. Such is the case of Ulukuwai (n° 3), and of Ulumara, a name which comes sixth (before Kisaruni) on the list published by Spear (1997 : 29) but which does not appear on the current official list of the Rwa. It was not possible to determine the reason for this<sup>6</sup>, but in any case the consonance of this name is undeniably Maasai. The second clue is the name of the sixth Rwa generation-set, the Kisaruni, which is also a Maasai name. It was mentioned as such by Sandford (1919: 6) and appears on the list of Arusha generation-sets published by Gulliver (1963: 33). The third clue is the name Marishari (no. 9 on the Rwa list), which in spite of the transcription difference, is quite similar to Merishari on the Arusha list. These sets are however not contemporaries. Indeed, according to Gulliver, the Merishari come right after the Kisaruni on the Arusha list, whereas the Rwa's Marishari come three sets later on the Rwa list. A further indication comes from Fosbrooke (1948), who pointed out that two Maasai names, Merisho and Kisale, designate statuses, not generation-sets. He explains that the Maasai distinguish two sub-groups within each generation-set: the eldest who are called Kisale, and the youngest who are called Merisho. Among the Rwa, these two names Kisali and Mirisho are on the contrary names of generation-sets (nos. 10 and 18).

Three more Maasai names on the Rwa list, Ulutalala, Ulutuwati, and Ulutareto (nos. 15, 16 and 17), perfectly correspond to those of the Arusha (Spear 1997 : 29 and Gulliver 1963 : 33). The Rwa explain that at that time (from 1881 to 1929 according to Spear) they joined the Maasai age system because they were not in a position to fight them. Spear confirms this assertion: around 1881 the Rwa "took the dramatic step of joining with Kisongo and Arusha Maasai to initiate their young men into the new Maasai age-set known as Talala". Solidarity being the watchword between members of the same set, this sheltered the Rwa from the attacks they had been subjected to until then. They ended this association with the Maasai system at the Kisali generation-set (no. 18) because the colonial authority had imposed a relative peace that made this alliance less necessary (Spear 1997: 29-30). But even so, two generation-sets later, the name of the Seuri (no. 20) was once again an Arusha/Maasai name (Spear 1997: 29; Ndagala 1992: 93). In total, almost half the generation-set names of the Rwa can be traced to a Maasai origin. This denotes a strong osmosis between the two systems, even if the maasai/arusha word for generation-set, *olaje*, pl. *ilajjik* (Fosbrooke 1948), is totally different from the word *irika*, pl. *marika* used by the Rwa. Beyond name differences or similarities, the structures of these age systems should also be compared.

The Maasai have two age systems, one in the north and the other in the south (Spencer 1988 : 94-99). The Maasai of the south, particularly the Kisongo, are geographically closer to the Arusha and the Rwa. Their system combines "two parallel series of fairly autonomous alternate generations" (Hazel 1985 : 253). The Arusha, who modelled their system on the Maasai Kisongo (Fosbrooke 1948, 1956 ; Gulliver 1963), also have a system of alternate generation-sets (Gulliver (1963 : 33, fig. 5), as do the Rwa. These three systems also share a common recruiting rule which does not strictly follow biological facts: not all of a man's sons are recruited in the generation-set of his "sons", but his eldest son often is (Hazel 1985 : 253 ; Gulliver 1963 : 30). The differences between these age-systems are numerous. The number of stages in a man's life is different in the Rwa system, which only includes two categories (the warriors and the elders, see below), while the Maasai and the Arusha have five (Gulliver 1963

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<sup>5</sup> My own research into this matter was inconclusive.

<sup>6</sup> Memory of course fades over time, to the point that today the Rwa are not able to specify, beyond the last ten generation-sets, which names come from which of the two alternating lines.

: 28)<sup>7</sup>. At some point in their history, did the Rwa choose to simplify their system in relation to the Maasai system, and if so, why? There is no element of the investigation that enables this question to be answered.

Beyond these formal aspects, Gulliver stresses that Arusha agropastoralists differ from the Kisongo Maasai—who only live on breeding—in how they use their age system, due to having different ways of life. This also applies to the Rwa, who in this regard distinguish themselves not only from the Maasai Kisongo, but also from the Arusha.

## II – THE ROLE OF THE AGE SYSTEM

### 1 - Conflict and intertribal relations

Age-systems have often been likened to military organisations, instituting cohorts of warriors in order to organise raids and to defend land and stock from rival groups. This military role is no longer relevant on Mount Meru, but is still remembered by the elders. Until the 1990's, in the areas of extensive pastoralism that are most exposed to theft, i.e. to the East and South of the mountain, the warrior's main duty was still to recover stolen livestock (usually taken by the Maasai). Nowadays the former military role of the warriors is recalled in ceremonies, in which they wear Maasai-style clothing and brandish their sticks like the Maasai. Moreover, in the age-system ceremonies of transfer, when the older generation-set of warriors gives up its role and a younger set of warriors takes it over, the crucial moment is the solemn transfer of the spear, a military symbol, from the older to the younger generation-set of warriors. The Rwa age-system, however, never was an exclusively military organisation, as can be observed in many other systems, such as that of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1936).

Age systems provide a frame for violent encounters between rival tribes, insofar as two equivalent sets of warriors fight each other. These conflicts are a sort of language, building bridges between similar groups. The benefit is that the weakest protagonists, in times of war, can merge into their enemies' age system in order to save their lives. Such was the case of three Rwa generation-sets (Ulutalala, Ulutuwati, and Ulutareto, i.e. n° 15, 16 and 17) which merged into the Maasai system to avoid total demise. This process turns enemies into peers, i.e. people who are meant to help one another. This is a survival scheme<sup>8</sup>, demonstrated by many examples in East-Africa (Kurimoto and Simonse 1998 : 12).

The importance of the principle of solidarity has to be stressed at this point, as it is a common feature to all age/generational systems. It lays at the very core of their operating logic. All these systems indeed are meant to define social categories, and then to give them a content. The content is provided by the common destiny that is shared by peers of the same group, who collectively go through a series of successive statuses, and the cohesion brought by this identical destiny is strengthened by the solidarity which binds them.

As a result, the equivalence between sets, which is at play in times of war, sometimes makes it

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<sup>7</sup> Namely the *junior murren*, *senior murren*, *junior elder*, *senior elder*, then *retired elder*.

<sup>8</sup> Similar survival schemes can be observed in the Sahel, when loosing fighters choose to place themselves under their enemies' protection by becoming their smiths (Baroin 2012). Another example is provided by the Bedouins : a murderer can seek protection of his own victim's kin by taking refuge under his tent. In such a case, hospitality rules prevail over retaliation.

possible to avoid a blood bath. In times of peace as well, it provides a bridge between sets that goes beyond tribal affiliations. In this way, the prevailing hospitality and mutual aid between peers help the Rwa relate to their Arusha and Maasai neighbours. This also is a widespread aspect of age systems, as noted by Kurimoto and Simonse (1998).

Structural violence is not only at play between tribes, it may also take place between different age groups within one single tribe, as has been stressed by Kurimoto & Simonse (1998). In the Maasai and Arusha age systems, for example, structural antagonism prevails between adjacent age groups (Fosbrooke 1948 ; Gulliver 1963). Among the Rwa likewise, conflicts between adjacent generation-sets prevailed until around 1920. They fought over spouses, the reason being that all warriors had to be married before they retired. Those who were still bachelors therefore married girls from the next generation-set, who were normally expected to be married within their own set. Young men from this set fought those rivals, which led to many casualties, but such fights no longer take place nowadays. All in all, one may conclude that there is no more ground today for the Rwa age-system to play its former military role, and that structural conflicts within their system wore off as well. The Rwa offer no explanation for this change, but it could be a consequence of the upheavals caused by the colonial conquest (see below).

Ultimately, it can therefore be concluded that today, the military role of the Rwa age system has lost its reason for being, and that internal structural antagonisms have disappeared as well. The age-system, on the other hand, still adequately ensures the control of the young by elders.

## 2 - Control of the young

From the point of view of the Rwa themselves, one of the main reasons for the existence of the age system is socialisation and training of the young. Two steps contribute to this. The first, circumcision, is performed individually or in small groups even before the establishment of the generation-set that these boys will form. The second is the structuring of this new generation-set through the assignment of specific chiefs and “fathers” to guide it.

### *Circumcision and learning respect*

Collective and individual processes intermingle in the life of the Rwa since the generation-set of fathers must first jointly choose the right time to begin their sons’ circumcision before each son undergoes the operation, either individually or with a few peers. This is a major step in a man’s life; it is also an indispensable precondition to another collective event, that of the joint assumption of the status of warriors at the moment when a new generation-set is added to the age system. Circumcision (*urini*) is an individual operation, but it is readily practiced in small groups since it is considered preferable to have witnesses. An uncircumcised boy (*iseka*, pl. *maseka*) is a minor in every respect and is not supposed to have sexual relations<sup>9</sup>. Circumcision gives him a foothold in social life. He becomes *nsero*, (pl. *wasero*), can get married, and will be part of the next generation-set of warriors when it is formed. He will have to be married at the latest before his generation-set retires.

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<sup>9</sup> If an uncircumcised boy happens to make a girl pregnant, it is very shameful, and he will get himself circumcised as soon as possible.

What gives meaning to circumcision is its accompanying initiation. During a period of reclusion, far away from the world of girls and women, the newly circumcised young men receive (received) secret basic instruction in living their adult life properly.

According to the pattern that still prevailed around 1980-1990, the young man himself decided to get circumcised around the age of 18-20. The operation took place during a period of reclusion lasting one to three months in temporary huts in the middle of the forest or in the bush, far from houses. There, from their elders or “fathers”, the circumcised young men received instruction called *mbiaa*, of which women were supposed to remain ignorant. Set forth in an encrypted language and taking the form of chanted refrains, and with the pedagogical support of plants that each carried a symbolic message, the young people learned the rules of adult behaviour one after the other. This instruction’s goal is to teach young people how to respect their elders and how to behave towards women (during their periods, when they give birth, etc.) and with their future wife specifically. The instructor is a specialist belonging to the generation-set of the “fathers” of the circumcised young men, therefore the age-system, via this man, is in charge of these young men’s education. After their seclusion period, the young circumcised men followed a number of food taboos. They were supposed to eat neither green vegetables nor ripe bananas. Above all, they were forbidden to drink banana beer, which was the exclusive privilege of mature men (*nsuri*, pl. *wasuri*), i.e. those who are no longer warriors (Baroin 2001). A large number of today’s mature men underwent this “traditional” circumcision. They have a very positive opinion of the instruction they received on this occasion and they regret that it has been practically abandoned. The constraints of modern life have seriously jeopardised this instruction.

Modern circumcision is rarely accompanied by instruction, or it is greatly shortened. The operation is carried out in a hospital, usually at a much earlier age, at a time decided by the father. Two factors have contributed to this change. The first is concern for hygiene, since hospital circumcision limits the risk of infection, particularly by AIDS. The second is schooling, since the long period of initiatory reclusion is incompatible with the school calendar. Children who undergo hospital circumcision at a young age therefore receive little or none of that traditional instruction which presupposed sufficient maturity, and was a very effective socialisation factor, placing emphasis on respect for adults.

Whether circumcised under the old system or the new one, the young men join the generation-set that corresponds to their age. Its recruitment begins when the incumbent warriors become too old to fulfil this role. To mark the transition, these retiring warriors organise a major ceremony in which their generation-set literally “goes to bed” (*irika likelala*, “the generation-set goes to bed”). For the third time, they change status. First, from uncircumcised boys (*iseka*, pl. *maseka*) to warriors (*nsero* pl. *wasero*), and now they collectively ascend to the third and final male status, that of mature men (*nsuri*, pl. *wasuri*).

New responsibilities now fall to them: management of the land, and some of them become lineage or clan chiefs, a position that a warrior cannot hold. This rule is very strict, as illustrated by chief (*Mangi*) Sandi Nanyaro’s case<sup>10</sup>. He was still a warrior (of generation-set Kisali, n° 18) when he was elected chief in 1923. Because a warrior cannot hold such a position, he had to become a *nsuri* without delay and was thus upgraded one level to the higher generation-set (Ulutareto, n° 17). When they age, when their ability to walk long

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<sup>10</sup> His name is spelled Sante by Spear (1997).

distances decreases and they will not be able to attend far away meetings, older men become advisors to younger generations but there is no official transition marking this passage. The status of mature man is kept until death.

### *The hierarchical structure of the new generation-set*

The new generation-set replacing the former warriors now begins structuring itself. As an example, let us take the most recent case, that of the Kilovio (generation-set no. 23). First they choose specific “fathers” to guide them. These “fathers” belong to the Ulutalala generation-set (no. 21) since the Kilovio are their “sons”. Preference is given to the youngest of these “fathers”, and the choice is first made at the level of the village, then at the level of the group of villages<sup>11</sup>, and finally at the general level of the Rwa as a whole. In this way, each local Kilovio group is linked to a particular local “father”, while at the general level a “father” of all of the Kilovio guides their whole generation-set. After having established this organisation of “fathers”, the Kilovio use the same procedure to elect their own chiefs and assistants at various hierarchical levels. The age system therefore defines a pyramid of chiefs who supervise society in a manner similar to clan chiefs, but with distinct roles. Similarly to the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 255), an organisational homology is observed between the lineage system and the age system.

Because the generation-set chooses its own supervisors from its “father’s” generation-set, the social control these elders exert is stronger than if the choice was made differently. Such gerontocratic systems are widespread in East-Africa, a fact which has been stressed by Spencer (1965) about the Samburu, a Maa speaking group from Northern Kenya. Consensual links thus connect certain particular “fathers” to the group of their “sons” at every hierarchical level. These “fathers” advise their “sons” under various circumstances, for example when they must organise a meeting or choose a new chief. Conversely, the “sons” call on their “father” if a problem arises that falls outside the clan’s remit. The roles of the lineage system and the age system are in effect distinct. The lineage system deals with land issues and jural problems (inheritance, the fate of widows, etc.), while the age system addresses personal behaviour and marital relations. This area presents many potential sources of conflict: sexual relations, infidelity, drunkenness, domestic violence, denominational conflicts when the husband and wife clash about religion, for example when the husband is Lutheran and his wife is Pentecostal, and they cannot agree on which church to attend on Sundays. This gives “fathers” and generational chiefs many opportunities to intervene, and enables the age system to preserve a certain relevance beyond the warriors’ former defensive role. Today it is no longer a question of defending the land, organising razzias or even recovering stolen livestock (usually taken by the Maasai), since these thefts are less common. Instead, the “warriors” of the incumbent generation-set undertake various community interest projects. Specifically, during funerals, it is they who are responsible for digging the grave, distributing food to visitors and cleaning the premises after the ceremony. They can also be given the task of carrying bricks when a school is being built, or maintaining roads. Anyone who is absent receives a fine.

In principle these “warriors” should respect the behavioural code they were taught at circumcision. However, as this teaching almost disappeared, some young people may display a lot of carelessness these days, for instance by getting drunk even though alcohol consumption

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<sup>11</sup> An administrative division or “ward”.

is considered to be the privilege of elders. The oldest men lament the erosion of manners. Deference is losing ground and in order to restore it, the Rwa's political leaders were planning, as of 2014, to place this instruction back on the agenda in the form of training seminars. Furthermore, energetic measures were taken in 2011 to restore discipline among young people, under the impetus of the chief "father" of the Kilovio. A large meeting took place under the ethnic group's emblematic tree, the *mringaringa* (*Cordia abyssinica*, Borag.)<sup>12</sup> in the village of Poli, assembling the Kilovio and their Ulutalala fathers under the leadership of the supreme chief. There it was decided that a punishment of 60 lashes from a stick (on the backside) would be administered to any Kilovio who used abusive language linked to drunkenness, or dressed indecently: earrings, a cockscomb hairstyle or low trousers showing underwear in the case of men; overly short skirts or tight-fitting trousers in the case of women<sup>13</sup>. This consensual measure enforced by the local Kilovio chiefs is unquestionably effective.

But establishing dialogue between generations and teaching respect are not the age system's only functions. Its role—by no means a minor one—also consists in regulating sex lives, marital alliances and procreation.

### 3 - Sex life, marriage and procreation

As Hazel (2000) noted, East-African generational systems share a number of rules which reinforce the separation of generations. These rules not only organize their separation through time, but also through space, and they apply equally in the sexual, marital and procreative lives of individuals. All of these rules can be observed among the Rwa, a fact that makes their own social characteristics part of a much broader scheme.

The distinction of generation-sets through time is a well-established fact, as mentioned above. The spatial separation of generation-sets, however, is not as conspicuous as it is in other groups such as the Cushitic people (Rendille, Borana, Konso et Dassanetch) that Hazel focused on, or the Toposa of South-Sudan :

"When a visitor comes to a Toposa settlement during the daytime, he or she would rarely find men in the village as they would all be under their shade trees. There would be different and spatially separated trees, one for each generation-set of the closer vicinity. ... It would be mostly the elders, who are not active any more, who sit or to lie under the tree, but when the younger men are not in the cattle camps or busy otherwise, they would also come to their tree."

(Müller-Dempf 2009 : 189).

There are no specific meeting places for each generation-set among the Rwa. Although Rwa warriors do hold their meetings on their own, they will also mix with other men of all ages in lineage or clan meetings. But social distance is observed between generations. Warriors have to demonstrate respect towards the elderly, and no familiarity is allowed towards uncircumcised boys.

Sexual life is also strictly delimited. First of all, uncircumcised boys are not supposed to have sex. Marital or extra-marital sex is only allowed to circumcised men, after their initiation

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<sup>12</sup> All meetings concerning the Rwa as a whole are held under this majestic tree.

<sup>13</sup> However, women are not subjected to this punishment.

period is finished. The teaching they receive during this period aims to guide them in their relationship to women.

While a warrior's sexual life goes without saying, the age system orients the choice of sexual partners and marital alliances. The sex lives of men are first and foremost marked by the spirit of sharing and camaraderie that must prevail among age peers. It binds members of the same generation-set to help one another in manifold situations such as farming, building houses, recovering stolen livestock, preparing ceremonies, contributing to one's wedding expenses or medical costs if need be. This solidarity does not depend on personal choices, even though every man additionally has a personal friend among his peers. This spirit of sharing also implies wife-sharing in the sense that, as in the case of the Maasai, the Borana (Hazel 2000 : 13-14) or others, a husband is not supposed to be offended if his wife has sexual relations with a peer from his generation-set<sup>14</sup>. Terms of address reflect this situation, since a wife calls all men of her husband's generation-set "my husband" (*mmi wakwa*), and they in turn call her "my wife" (*nka wakwa*). However, these appellations do not reflect any widespread sharing of wives. Though these sexual relations are allowed, they are less common today. They denote the existence of a symbolic matrimonial pool. Men of the same generation-set form a "procreative unit" according to Hazel (2000 : 26).

Besides the positive rule that allows sexual relations between members of the same generation-set, two strict prohibitions delimit these "procreative units". The first one is that a man should not marry the daughter of a peer of the same generation-set, and the second that he should not have any sexual relations with a woman of his father's generation-set. In other words, two categories of women are prohibited to him: those of his father's generation-set, and those of his son's generation-set, i.e. women who belong to generation-sets  $n - 2$  and  $n + 2$  for a man belonging to generation-set  $n$ .

While such prohibited marriage exceptionally happens, sexual relations of this kind are considered tainted and in need of repair through a purification ritual. Transgressing these rules exposes the offender to very heavy penalties: expulsion, a fine, and ritual purification to atone for the offence. The most serious penalty is expulsion from the generation-set. First, the guilty party is lowered to the next generation-set, something that is shameful (*usutu*) for him. He must also pay a heavy fine (*kitooso*), by giving members of the offended generation-set a bull, twelve buckets of banana beer<sup>15</sup> and two black, fat-tailed sheep, which are sacrificed in the forest, and whose meat the peers consume together. Third, in order to be cleansed of his offence, he must undergo a purification ritual that consists in being stripped and then smeared with the fat of the sheep offered as a sacrifice to the offended generation-set. At the same time, away from the men, the women subject his partner to the same fate.

These prohibitions have the effect of considerably widening the range of bans dictated by kinship, which must be mentioned in this connection. The Rwa evolve within a patrilineal, patrilocal system, and they use Omaha kinship terminology. Various marriages are forbidden in this context. Marriage is accepted within the patrilineal clan, but it is prohibited within the patrilineal lineage (*numba*) encompassing five generations, or between cross cousins, or still more between the children of sisters (parallel matrilineal first cousins). Also avoided is the

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<sup>14</sup> Having several partners is a recognized way to achieve risk-diversification: if a curse happens to strike one's husband, all his biological children will be threatened whereas those of his children that he himself did not father will be spared (Baroin 2013).

<sup>15</sup> An ancient drink with a strong ritual value, see Baroin 2001.

redoubling of alliances between families, particularly the exchange of sisters.

The sexual prohibitions that are linked to the generational system thus play their part in distinguishing generations, such a distinction being a basic principle of these systems. They can also be understood as a type of incest prohibition. When a child is born, no one indeed could say for sure who his biological father actually is, as the sharing of wives within the generation-set blurs the tracks. A man who would want to marry the daughter of one of his comrades could thus not warrant that he, himself, is not the father of this girl. The risk is to marry one's own daughter and the veto on this type of marriage amounts to incest prohibition. In a less direct way, marrying a woman from the generation-set of one's own father would be another type of incest. While this woman is not her would-be partner's mother, no one can warrant that this man's father did not have sex with her. In such a case, father and son would mix their semen in the same womb. This identity "short circuit" resulting from a common sexual partner is called a "second type incest" by Héritier-Augé (1991).

Besides incest avoidance, these prohibitions bring forth a decisive separation of generation-sets, as mentioned above. Otherwise, a breach of these rules would lead to entanglement of generations, as children born from parents belonging to two different generation-sets could not be classified in the sequence of generation-sets<sup>16</sup>.

The urge to maintain the distinction between generation-sets explains other restrictions pertaining to procreation. A woman should stop becoming pregnant when her daughter becomes a mother, since mother and daughter belong to different generation-sets, they should not have children of the same age, i.e. of the same generation-set. As Baxter and Almagor (1978) underscored, regulating procreation is a corner stone of generational-systems. It is more important than the age of getting married, which in some cases is substantially postponed, as among the Samburu of Kenya (Spencer 1965). Moreover, the age for having children is not systematically related to the age of marriage, since abortion or infanticide are other frequent means to avoid unwanted births (Hazel 2000 : 21). Among the Rwa, marriage does not take place late in life, but in the past they did regulate births through infanticide. This practice was strongly opposed by the Lutheran Church, to the point that it has most likely disappeared today. This generational birth control is not respected as much today, a change lamented particularly by the older men. They also regret that the rule concerning the spacing of births is no longer respected. It used to be the case that the last-born child had to be weaned before the next conception. These gaps are no longer strictly observed, owing especially to the influence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (E.L.C.T.), which is preponderant in Rwa country and encourages a high birth-rate in order to increase the number of parishioners<sup>17</sup>.

Peatrik (1995 : 35-39) notes that many East-African age and generation systems share similar sets of rules that delimit procreation. She considers two models can be identified

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<sup>16</sup> If a man married the daughter of his generation-set peer, their child would be both the son (through the father) and the grand-son (through the mother's father) of men belonging to the same generation-set.

<sup>17</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (E.L.C.T.) was dominant among the Rwa until a violent conflict erupted in 1990-1993 within the Church itself. This led to the birth of a new rival Lutheran Church, the African Mission Evangelism Church (A.M.E.C.), and to the local rise of many other denominations (Baroin 1996). The Pentecostal Church is increasingly influential, though much less than among the Kikuyu of Kenya for example (Droz 2015).



within these rules: "restrained" systems with a stable population, and less constrained systems with an expanding one, the first being usually monogamous and the others widely polygamous. She notes nonetheless that no clear demarcation exists between the two models. However, the Rwa do not conform very well to this typology. They clearly have a "restrained" system as far as rules are concerned, but polygamy prevailed until they became Christians and their population is rising fast, as mentioned above. But it is also true that the Rwa age system is not purely generational, since biological filiations within families only very partially coincide with the symbolic filiations of this system.

#### **4 - Ceremonies and the ritual aspect**

Another aspect of the age system—by no means an unimportant one—is its ceremonial aspect. The system leads to many ceremonies that spectacularly punctuate the social life of the Rwa. The most important of them, from a historical perspective, is the generation-set retirement ceremony, when one generation-set “goes to bed” in order to make way for a new generation-set. This ceremony is organised village by village and marks the history of this population. The retirement of the Kisali (no. 18) took place around 1946-1947, that of the Sitimu (no. 19) around 1963-1965, that of the Seuri (no. 20) around 1976-1978, that of the Roketi (no. 21) between 1991 and 1997, and finally that of the Kakisha (no. 22) between 2005 and 2009<sup>18</sup>. But the ceremonial process is far from limited to these great events. As an example, let's consider the case of the most recent generation-set in 2014, the Kilovio (no. 23). After the retirement of the Kakisha, the Kilovio proceeded to structure themselves by choosing their “fathers” and chiefs as mentioned above. These choices were followed by as many investiture ceremonies at every hierarchical level of society. Thus the Kilovio first instituted all of their “fathers”, then all of their chiefs and all of these chiefs' assistants. Lastly, the cycle concluded with a final ceremony in which the Kilovio asked their “fathers” for authorisation to be circumcised. This request is a pure formality, because most of them have already been circumcised. But they will all have to be circumcised and married before the time comes to take their retirement.

These ceremonies have a cost because the generation-set involved, who covers all of the expenses, strives to do things as lavishly as possible. Therefore they need to do some fundraising after obtaining the District Commissioner's authorisation to collect funds and organise the ceremony. This collection takes time because of the large number of contributors to be approached: 105 households in the case of the retirement of the Roketi in the village of Songoro in 1997, and 125 in the neighbouring village of Urisho that same year, each contributing about 5000 Tanzanian shillings<sup>19</sup>. This money allowed them to make considerable purchases. The Roketi of Urisho, for their retirement, bought 130 buckets of banana beer, 8 crates of soda, 1 crate of bottled beer, two bulls<sup>20</sup>, 2 bags of corn (totalling 180 kg), 50 kg of rice, 8 to 10 litres of oil. The Roketi of Songoro, for their part, did not offer alcoholic beverages for their retirement due to the substantial influence of the Lutheran Church in their village. The Lutheran Church fiercely opposes all alcohol consumption and systematically boycotts all ceremonies in which these drinks are offered. Instead of alcohol, the Roketi of Songoro purchased 70 crates of soda, in addition to 2 bulls, 2 goats, 2 bags of corn, 75 kg of rice and 4 buckets of potatoes. These food purchases give a sense of the

<sup>18</sup> These dates are close to those indicated by Spear for the Arusha (1997: 29).

<sup>19</sup> This amount can be compared with the price of a crate of soda, which was worth 6000 Tsh two years earlier.

<sup>20</sup> At that time, a bull was worth about 70,000 Tanzanian shillings.

number of people to be regaled at the end of the ceremony. It takes a long time to plan these events, and a year or two can elapse between the moment the decision is taken and the day of the ceremony. The chosen date is preferably a Saturday, since some people have jobs and Sunday is reserved for mass. Preference is also given to August and September, when work in the fields has finished.

All of these ceremonies proceed according to a similar process regardless of whether they mark the retirement of a generation-set, the investiture of a chief or a formal request for authorisation to be circumcised. They never start early, tending to begin between late morning and mid-afternoon, since one must wait for the guests to arrive, particularly the dignitaries, some of whom come from far away. A rostrum is set up, or a row of plastic chairs is provided for the most important figures, while others will sit facing them on benches or chairs, or on the ground if these are not available. Members of the generation-set concerned make their entrance in procession, brandishing their sticks at the sky. On this occasion, they drape a red fabric over top of their usual clothing, in the Maasai style. It is a reminder of the past while also being a form of disguise, since their clothing is far from really resembling that of the Maasai. In some cases they are followed by their wives, who carry on their heads the crates of soda that replace the banana beer which used to be served for the occasion. After everyone has been seated, a common prayer precedes long speeches by dignitaries, and then the ceremony itself gets underway.

Let us examine the case of the generation-set retirement ceremony, observed on three occasions<sup>21</sup>. The retiring generation-set arrives at the site brandishing its flag. Its members sit down, and then the generation-set replacing them arrives in procession, preceded by its “fathers”. These young men noisily brandish their sticks, wearing clothing inspired by the Maasai: a *pagne* or a red fabric knotted at the shoulder, added to their usual shirt or t-shirt and trousers. Or they are all dressed the same, in a chequered fabric purchased for the occasion<sup>22</sup>.

After numerous speeches, a series of ceremonial gifts is bestowed. From hand to hand, from one dignitary to another, these gifts make their way to the supreme chief, who gives them to their recipients: first the “fathers” who served as advisors to the outgoing generation-set, each of whom receives a long stick, then a flyswatter, and finally a heavy blanket that is wrapped around his shoulders. Their spouses each receive a *pagne*. Next, the chiefs of the retiring generation-set each receive a thinner red, chequered, Maasai-style blanket, which the supreme chief places on their shoulders in the same way. Finally, each of the wives of these gentlemen is presented with a *pagne*. This presentation of these gifts takes time since every object is publicly unwrapped and passed from hand to hand before finally given to its recipient.

After this first phase of the ceremony, the symbolic transfer of duties begins. The chief of the outgoing generation-set of warriors returns the symbols—the spear and sword—and these objects are solemnly presented to the future chief of the new warriors. The outgoing generation-set’s flag is then lowered, while that of the new generation-set is raised in its place. Large *bougainvillea* necklaces are placed around the necks of various dignitaries and

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<sup>21</sup> Retirement of the Roketi of the village of Olunkungwado, in the ward of Engare Nanyuki on 26/10/1992; retirement of the Roketi from the whole ward of Engare Nanyuki on 23/11/1992; retirement of the Kakisha of the village of Songoro on 02/07/2010.

<sup>22</sup> This was the case with the Kakisha of Songoro in 2010. However, they chose a fabric with blue chequers to differentiate their clothing from the Maasai’s red-chequered outfits.

chiefs, and then everyone goes to the meal offered by the outgoing generation-set.

There were some evident changes during the long period when I observed various ceremonies from 1992 to 2014. First of all, there is an obvious increase in the strength of clerical influence. In 1992, the most important local Lutheran church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), was very hostile to generation ceremonies. It condemned and boycotted them as pagan events that give rise to lascivious dancing and unrestrained alcohol consumption. However, other churches less hostile to the traditions<sup>23</sup> did not snub these festivities. But nowadays the ELCT prefers not to cede this territory to its competitors. It often succeeds in imposing a ban on serving alcohol, and in return for this its own pastors say the prayers. In some cases the ceremony finishes with all of the warriors entering the local church to receive a blessing<sup>24</sup>. Today, banana beer has practically disappeared from all ceremonies, replaced by soda.

Another notable change is the surge of modern means of communication. Invitation cards are sent to dignitaries, and the day's programme is typed on a white sheet of paper to be distributed at the event. It even contains a detailed schedule, although this is rarely followed. A sound system is installed, with powerful speakers and a microphone. A master of ceremonies (MC) controls the sequence of events, and a video specialist often films the scene with a view to creating a DVD that is later sold as commemoration of the event. Although the clothing worn by women has not visibly changed (it is usually a corsage or t-shirt and a *pagne* that wraps around the waist and covers the legs), the most visible men now sport brand-new suits and ties. Another notable aspect is certain actors' desire to contribute to progress. The Kakisha of the village of Songoro provide a good example of this: on the occasion of their retirement in 2010, they publicly offered a set of new porcelain toilets to the local primary school.

## **5 -The integrative role of the age system**

The Rwa value their age system because of its integrative role, which they deem to be its main benefit. It is common knowledge that the military service, even in Europe, is very effective in this respect. Such was also formerly the case for the Rwa warriors. It is no longer so, but other aspects of the age system still contribute to social integration. The first one is the assignment of each (male) individual to a group: every man is bound to become a member of a given generation-set, depending on his father's generation-set and the year he was born. This automatic process leaves him with no choice and no one is left out, a very secure situation from psychological point of view<sup>25</sup>. The second, equally reassuring factor is the solidarity binding the members of a group. Thirdly, very consensual guidance is another powerful means of social integration, all the more so in that each new generation-set of warriors chooses its "fathers" and chiefs to advise and guide them at each level, from local to the top. The age-based organisation also frames and sets limits on sex life, marriage and procreation, and helps solve various problems, especially those between spouses. These key aspects of life are thus never entirely left to chance and to individual choices. Finally the fifth element, not an unimportant one, is the sum of all social events that age comrades will have to organise and

<sup>23</sup> Such was the case of the African Mission Evangelism Church (A.M.E.C.), a rival Lutheran Church.

<sup>24</sup> This was the case in Songoro in 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Those who commit generational incest are expelled from their generation as mentioned earlier, but they join the next generation. No matter what happens, one always belongs to a generation.

achieve together. These ceremonies involve large expenditures and reinforce solidarities as the generation-set in charge is always eager to demonstrate its proficiency.

All these factors put together contribute to build a cognitive and structural order that regulates everybody's life and ensures stability of the whole society in the long run. The age system of the Rwa enrolls each new generation-set into their global history. It fosters a collective process of aging. It also fosters a general feeling of belonging, since men of the same generation-set move together through the successive stages of life, with the change of status, duties and prerogatives proper to each age. The moral and social role of the age system is therefore essential. On the other hand, its influence is very limited in the political sphere.

### III – AGE SYSTEM, CLAN ORGANIZATION AND CHIEFTAINCY

The Rwa age system carries little weight in political matters, insofar as there is not one generation that holds power exclusively, for a given period, before transmitting this status to another generation. Their situation is therefore much different from what is observed in some more northern societies with less marked lineage organizations, where the political authority that comes with the status of “Fathers of the Country” periodically passes from one generation to another, in systems that can be either cyclical or linear, and are often very complex. There are no “Fathers of the Country” among the Rwa, inasmuch as the political role is held by a well-structured central chieftainship. The age system and clan organization are subordinate to it. The Rwa constitution mentioned above details this very precisely. It is not limited to recalling customary law, it also very clearly states political rules of operation. The election method is recorded there, as are the prerogatives and responsibilities of each category of chief. However, this text does not say everything. It does not express what everyone considers obvious, the fact that a warrior cannot be a chief.<sup>26</sup> This role can only be held by mature men, by all mature men (unless they are too old), not just one generation among them, unlike the systems that have just been evoked. In this sense, the Rwa age system cannot be characterized as purely generational, even if all of these systems have many points in common.

The age system's place in the Rwa's political organization can be measured by its links with the chieftaincy, in comparison with the clans. A description of the operation of the chieftaincy could itself be the exclusive subject of a lengthy article<sup>27</sup>, as could a description of the role of clans. This is not my intention. I am limiting myself to succinctly presenting the overall structure of the political system, to bring out significant elements concerning the age system.

The Rwa's current chieftaincy was created in 1951 under turbulent circumstances described above. Today it is made up of three authorities: the supreme chief, his council and the Constitution.

Let us first consider the title of the supreme chief, since it reveals the hierarchies in place. In *Ki-rwa* language, he is called *Nshili nnini*, literally “the great chief”, using the word *nshili*, which designates every chief, no matter what kind. On the other hand, in the Constitution, he is not the chief but the chairman. This text, considered official by the Rwa, is written in Swahili and is periodically subject to amendments. I am referring to the 2008 text, still in

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<sup>26</sup> With the obvious exception of chiefs that warriors choose in their own groups, as we saw above.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief presentation, see Baroin 2003.

force in 2014, entitled *Katiba ya jadi na mila za Wameru*, “Constitution of the Customs and Traditions of the Meru<sup>28</sup>”. In it, the supreme chief of the Rwa carries two titles. First he is *Mwenyekiti wa koo zote Meru*, “Chairman of All Meru Clans”. He is also *Mwenyekiti wa Jadi na Mila za Wameru*, which the Rwa translate into English as *Chairman of Taboo and Meru Traditions*<sup>29</sup>. The important point is that he is President of All Clans: generation-sets are not mentioned. The Constitution also specifies that only supreme clan chiefs have the authority to name him. Furthermore, what is not said in this text, but has been pointed out by many informants, is that only a supreme clan chief can be legitimately chosen as supreme chief. The hierarchy is thus respected, since one cannot place someone of an inferior status above oneself. Similarly, a clan’s supreme chief is chosen from among the lineage chiefs, and the supreme chief of a generation-set from among the local chiefs of that generation-set. But these two hierarchies remain separate, inasmuch as the Constitution also specifies that a generation-set chief cannot become a clan chief or supreme chief. Therefore, the supreme chief’s title and this set of rules clearly express the primacy of clans over the age system: the supreme chief is Chairman of All Clans (and only of clans), the generation-set chiefs have no say in designating him, and the two parallel chief hierarchies are impermeable. Generation-set chiefs are therefore limited to an inferior status in this political system.

The subordinate position of generation-set chiefs in relation to other chiefs is also marked by their *regalia*, that is to say their chief staffs. The chief staff, or *ndata*, is a widespread power symbol in the region<sup>30</sup> that every Rwa chief holds in his hand while exercising his duties. Around 50 centimeters long, it is carved out of very hard wood, *senèfu* (*Junipera procera*), ending on its upper extremity by a sphere about 8 centimeters in diameter. The chief holds this sacred, dangerous object vertically under its sphere, using it to either inflict a curse on someone or separate belligerents. But these staffs are not all identical. The Rwa Constitution stipulates that the chief staffs should be distinguished from one another by the number of grooves carved under the knob. The supreme chief’s staff has three grooves, that of a supreme clan chief has two, that of a local clan chief has only one, and that of a generation-set chief has no groove. It is hard to think of a clearer way of indicating the hierarchy of these various chiefs.

The supreme chief of the Rwa, the *Nshili nnini*, presides over a council that helps him with his duties. The Rwa call it *Mringaringa*, the name of a majestic tree which they hold their sessions near (see above). The Constitution, in Swahili, calls it the *Kamati kuu* or “great committee”, and specifies its composition: the supreme chief and his assistant, the secretary and his assistant, the 17 supreme chiefs of the 17 clans, the supreme chiefs of the generation-sets, and six personalities chosen based on various criteria. Generation-set chiefs are therefore members of this council, as are clan chiefs, but with the difference that they are cited after them and are obviously much less numerous. The supreme chief and his council make up the supreme authority that represents and directs the Rwa population. They decide on any dispute that could not be settled at a lower level, ensuring that the Constitution is respected and guaranteeing the general harmony. They are the only ones with the power to authorize the

<sup>28</sup> Since the Rwa are known in Tanzania as the Meru, this is the term they use to designate themselves in the Constitution.

<sup>29</sup> This is in fact an inexact translation, since *jadi* does not mean “taboo” but rather translates as origin, ancestor, filiation, genealogy.

<sup>30</sup> According to Henri Médard, the use of these staffs is seen among the Maasāi, and according to José Kagabo, sages and arbiters use a staff (*bakora*) throughout the Swahili world to stop a battle or curse someone (personal conversations).

dangerous curse ritual, which threatens all undeclared delinquents (Baroin 2013). They also coordinate the generational cycle. They set the dates for ceremonies to be held and specify the deadlines for holding them. The paramount chief is their guest of honor.

The Constitution specifies the respective responsibilities of lineage chiefs and patrilineal clan chiefs. It testifies to a great concern for clarity with a view to avoiding conflicts that could arise between chiefs at the various hierarchical levels. Let us briefly outline their prerogatives. The supreme clan chief is responsible for resolving any quarrels with other clans, helping the local chiefs of his own clan, discussing within his clan any possible use of the curse ritual<sup>31</sup>, collecting or demanding (according to the case) compensation for injuries or murder, inaugurating local clan chiefs, organizing the retirement ceremonies of these chiefs, and ensuring general harmony within the clan. At the echelon below, local patrilineal chiefs are responsible for dividing up inheritance and arbitrating all problems relating to assaults and injuries. Finally, the lineage chiefs at the bottom of the clan hierarchy are limited to avoiding trouble in the families under their charge, and protecting widows and orphans, as well as their land, which is often threatened by the covetousness of close patrilineal kin.

Compared with the wide range of details in the Constitution about clan organization, the responsibilities of the generation-set chiefs are stated more succinctly. A generation-set chief is responsible for organizing his group's meetings, ensuring respect for good manners, making the necessary arrangements when the moment of retirement comes, making sure that the next generation-set is set up, ensuring respect towards other generation-sets, and not taking any of the responsibilities that belong to the clan. If he breaks these rules, the generation-set chief will have to pay a large fine that is also specified by the Constitution, namely a bull. Once again, one sees the great care taken in this text to prevent generation-set chiefs from encroaching upon the prerogatives of the clans.

Therefore all in all, the Constitution ensures that the chieftaincy vigorously controls the age system. It gives the political advantage to the clans and ensures that generation-set chiefs do not overstep their remit.

Similarly, among the Chaga of Mount Kilimanjaro, the chief once held strong authority over the warriors. But the Chaga age system has practically disappeared in recent years, to the point that prominent authors like Stahl (1964) and Moore (1986) did not even consider it worth mentioning. However, some information on this subject is to be found in Raum's book *Chaga Childhood* (1940). According to Raum, toward the end of the 19th century the Chaga were tempted to imitate the Maasai system (Raum 1940: 40, note 2), but the institution remained firmly under the control of the Chaga chief. This man fed and clothed the warriors (*ibid.*: 344) and decided the right moment to circumcise a new set of young men, making sure the group included one of his own sons, who thus became the obvious chief of the new set. Thus, "an age-group is the bodyguard of a royal son" (*ibid.*: 372). Therefore, the Chaga's central power seized upon the age system, manipulating it to his own benefit, whereas among the Rwa the age system remained more autonomous. Whereas the initiation camps that followed circumcision had not taken place for two centuries on Mount Kilimanjaro (*ibid.*: 320), the age system remains meaningful among the Rwa. It is now revived with enthusiasm as evidenced during ceremonies.

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<sup>31</sup> Since this ritual, used wrongly, can be a threat to all members of the clan when the undeclared delinquent it targets is one of them.

What is the reason for this difference? The two populations did not live through the same history and the Rwa age system went through difficult periods. A look back at the past may shed light on the reasons that drive today's Rwa to not only maintain, but revive their age system, despite modern living conditions that have generally tended to provoke the decline of age systems in East Africa.

#### **IV - HISTORICAL VARIATIONS IN THE AGE SYSTEM AND REASONS FOR ITS CURRENT REVIVAL**

If the Rwa age system is totally subordinate to the chieftaincy today, this was not always the case. It had a dominating role in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a virtual disappearance in the 1960s, and underwent a vigorous revival fifty years later.

During the precolonial period, when the Arusha arrived on Mount Meru in the 1830s, the Rwa were initially victims of their raids, before the two groups joined forces to attack other groups further away. Rwa warriors organized their expeditions independently of their chief (*Mangi*) and the clan chiefs. They brought back a considerable plunder of livestock and women, which freed them from their dependence on elders to get married and enabled them to play the leading role on Mount Meru (Spear 1997 : 30-34). Such was the situation when the first contacts with Europeans took place, first with the explorers Teleki and Höhnel in 1887, then with the first missionaries in 1896. The Rwa age system then closely matched the Arusha/Maasai age system<sup>32</sup>. These first contacts were unhappy ones. In 1887, Teleki et Höhnel were stripped of their belongings by the Rwa warriors. As Teleki protested to him, the chief replied that he had no influence on the warriors, and one of them clearly confirmed this point: "We are the masters here" he said (Spear 1997: 31). Nine years later, in 1896, the same chief Matunda could not prevent the warriors from killing the first missionaries, Ovir and Segebrock, who had settled their camp nearby in spite of his warnings. The German backlash was merciless, many Rwa warriors were killed and the land was ruined. One imagines that with this disaster, there were some empty classes in the pyramid of the ages, something that can lead to a change in the age system, particularly an end to the above-mentioned interclass hostility between adjacent age sets.

Later on, peace settled in under colonial domination. Lutheran missionaries set up in Rwa country and Christianity gradually established itself, bringing major changes in mentalities. The missionaries fought forcefully against polygamy and alcoholism, as well as the age system, trying to thwart what they saw as its retrograde influence (Baroin 2001). The warriors had lost their political ascent and the Rwa age system split from the Arusha/Maasai. But links still remained for a long time as the Rwa continued to participate in Maasai age-set ceremonies until 1959 (Spear 1997 : 30). The traditional chieftain first met with many problems with the German and later the British administrations, but slowly became stronger, albeit only thanks to *indirect rule* : as elsewhere in Africa, chieftaincy was reinforced by colonial power as the chiefs became colonial agents and tax collectors.

Further information is provided by the Canadian anthropologist Puritt, who stayed in Rwa country in 1965-1966. The Rwa age system, he mentions, was then on the wane (Puritt 1970 :

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<sup>32</sup> The period when three consecutive generations of the Rwa (nos. 15, 16 and 17) merged with the Arusha/Maasai system corresponds to the years 1880-1920 according to Gulliver (1963: 33).

105). Young Christians were circumcised at the hospital and initiation was vanishing. The Sitelingi generation-set (n° 20) was the last one and the opening of a new generation-set was debated. These indications, however, are strongly influenced by the place and dates when Puritt led his inquiries, and need to be put into perspective. Geographically, Puritt limited his stay to the westernmost and most westernised area of the Rwa territory (around the village of Akheri), where a more modern way of life was prevalent. Some young men were indeed circumcised at the hospital, as he reports, but the investigations I led thirty years later (starting in 1992), not only around Akheri but all over Rwa country, have shown that in the most remote areas (Engare Nanyuki on the eastern slope of Mount Meru, and in the lowlands to the south) traditional circumcision and initiation were still practiced at least until the years 1980-1990. Puritt's stay nevertheless corresponds to a low point in the age system. Yet it was not extinct as he implies, since a new generation-set was started ten years after his departure.

Let us now turn our attention to the recent period and the development factors it entails. Various authors have characterised age systems as being generally incompatible with modernisation, due to at least three factors: 1) modern education; 2) capitalism and the possibilities of promotion it offers outside of traditional systems; 3) government prohibitions in certain cases (Kurimoto and Simonse 1998: 25-26). What is the impact of these three factors on the Rwa society?

Modern education does play against the age system, as observed elsewhere, because the reclusion period of the circumcised young men is not very compatible with the school calendar. Similarly, hospital circumcision, which is carried out at the youngest age for sanitary reasons, dissociates this act from the teaching that is linked to it, which has been dropped *ipso facto*. As for the role of the State, it does not run counter to the age system in Tanzania. Each time funds are collected and ceremonies are held, the local *District Commissioner* first gives his authorisation. His presence is also regularly solicited alongside that of other dignitaries.

The influence of capitalism is more difficult to determine. On the one hand, it provides the Rwa with many salaried jobs, particularly in the nearby town of Arusha whose economy is flourishing. Others have public service jobs, and still others are tied up in various remunerative activities, to the point that the age system is becoming less important in their eyes. The Swedish sociologist Larsson (2001) analyses this socioeconomic diversification. But at the same time, some of the income from these activities goes to the organization of age system ceremonies, whose high cost has already been mentioned.

In truth, it is perhaps the clan organization that is most threatened by capitalism, since it challenges the authority of the clan chiefs in the area of property. In this respect, land-related matters are their main concern. The best plots reach very high prices on the road from Arusha to Moshi, and clan leaders are unable to prevent their sale to outsiders, a situation that undermines their leadership. Faced with this and other threats, they want to protect their culture.

Generally, the Rwa are well aware that modern life as elsewhere poses a threat to local identities. It only makes them feel a greater need to preserve their own. They feel this need, first, in view of their strategic weakness, as they are caught between two more powerful ethnic groups from which they are eager to demarcate themselves. In this respect, recall that the Rwa form a fairly small ethnic group (numbering around 250,000) situated between two much larger groups, the Arusha/Maasai to the east and the Chaga to the west. They quite



clearly feel and express the need to differentiate themselves from both<sup>33</sup>.

This aim is fulfilled through diverse means. The first one is their strong political institutions, made of a supreme chieftaincy relying on a supreme council and a "Constitution", a written document in which the Rwa recorded their customary law and political rules. Moreover, the supreme chief and his council ensure that their "Constitution" is periodically revised to keep up with modern times (Baroin 2003)<sup>34</sup>. Secondly, the authority of clan chiefs, despite slippage in the area of land property, is still strongly asserted and the chieftaincy is protecting it as well. The Rwa age system is the third component of this solid threefold structure. Its organization and prerogatives cut across the agnatic system with a complementary hierarchy of chiefs. The importance of the age system, however, is less than that of the clans in this overall political structure, in which it, too, depends on the chieftainship. And even if the traditional teaching linked to circumcision has practically disappeared, it is still possible to organize beautiful ceremonies. Moreover, in spite of the problems brought on by modern lifestyles, one must stress the fact that the Rwa benefit from a rich natural environment<sup>35</sup> and many take advantage of good economic opportunities. This offers a vivid contrast with other pastoral societies with similar age-systems further north, for which drought and pervasive conflicts are a bigger menace than modernization. These hardships represent indeed a threat not only to their age systems, but also to their very survival. On the contrary, Tanzania enjoys political stability, and its economic development —although inequalities are on the rise<sup>36</sup>— favors the Rwa by providing them the economic means to organize big age ceremonies. The age system, besides the many indispensable functions it fulfills, is therefore also a good way for the Rwa to get together, to celebrate and enjoy life. Therefore, all in all, the Rwa are in a position to serenely assert their cultural specificity. Strengthening their neo-traditional chieftaincy and reviving their old age system are good means to do so.

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<sup>33</sup> The conflict within the Lutheran Church in 1990-1993 partly stemmed from the Rwa's desire to have their own diocese, free from Chaga influence (Baroin 1996).

<sup>34</sup> For example, the latest version of this constitution, that of 2008, newly introduces the circumcision obligation for men (to limit the spread of AIDS) and the prohibition against excision for women (even though it had long been practiced by the Rwa), in response to injunctions from the government of Tanzania.

<sup>35</sup> However, it is threatened by the overuse of chemical products in agriculture, and by the cutting down of a large number of trees in order to sell the wood.

<sup>36</sup> As evidenced by Larsson (2001).

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